

LCQ22: Public benefits received by residents of public housing estates

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Ngan Man-yu and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (May 28):

Question:

There are views pointing out that with an ageing population, persistent poverty problem and increasing expenditure on education, there has been increasing public concern over the coverage, effectiveness and fairness of various social welfare payments and assistance schemes, and low-income residents of public housing estates (PHEs) are particularly dependent on the relevant benefits. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following information in respect of the PHE residents receiving (a) Working Family Allowance, (b) Old Age Living Allowance, (c) Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, (d) Old Age Allowance and (e) School Textbook Assistance (the beneficiaries) and their PHEs in the past three years: the top 20 PHEs with (i) the largest numbers of beneficiaries and (ii) the highest percentages of beneficiaries in the populations of the PHEs concerned (set out by social welfare payment and assistance scheme in a table), together with the names of the PHEs concerned, the districts in which they are located, their population sizes, the total amount of allowances involved, as well as the numbers of beneficiaries and the percentages of beneficiaries in the populations of the PHEs concerned;

(2) whether the Government has plans to comprehensively review the barriers faced by PHE residents in applying for (a) to (e) in (1), such as complicated application procedures, insufficient information transparency, digital divide or excessively stringent eligibility criteria, etc, and to introduce specific enhancement measures (e.g. streamlining the application procedures, providing exclusive support services for PHEs, etc) to increase the coverage and efficiency of the various schemes; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) given that the financial conditions of residents and demographic structures vary in different PHEs, whether the Government has studied implementing targeted schemes in PHEs with a larger number of beneficiaries to support residents in getting rid of poverty or receiving education, such as introducing additional programmes on vocational training, offering subsidies for extra-curricular activities or providing training on digital skills, so as to facilitate the lifting of inter-generational poverty and promote social mobility; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) in view of the relatively high proportion of elderly people and low-

income families in PHEs, whether the Government will, when considering adjustments to the amounts of allowances or eligibility requirements for receiving (a) to (e) in (1), accord priority to assessing the impact of such adjustments on residents of PHEs and adopt targeted measures to alleviate their financial burdens; if so, of the details (including the assessment mechanism and measures adopted); if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Education Bureau, Housing Department (HD), Social Welfare Department (SWD) and Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency (WFSFAA), I reply to the four parts of the question as follows:

(1) From 2022 to 2024, the top 20 public housing estates (PHEs) with the greatest number of recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), Old Age Living Allowance (OALA) and Old Age Allowance (OAA) as well as the districts in which these PHEs are located are set out in Tables 1 to 9 respectively. The SWD does not maintain a breakdown of the assistance and allowances by PHEs.

During the same period, the top 20 PHEs with the greatest number of Working Family Allowance (WFA) recipients, the districts in which these PHEs are located and the amount of allowance are set out in Tables 10 to 12 respectively.

In the school years from 2022/23 to 2024/25, the top 20 PHEs with the greatest number of School Textbook Assistance recipients, the districts in which these PHEs are located and the amount of assistance are set out in Tables 13 to 15 respectively.

The recipients of assistance and allowances in the above tables live in both rental and non-rental units in various types of PHEs (Note 1), while the HD does not keep annual statistics on the number of residents living in the non-rental units of the abovementioned PHEs. We are therefore unable to provide by year the total population of the PHEs in the above tables and the population percentage of recipients of the relevant assistance and allowances in the relevant PHEs.

(2) PHE residents and other Hong Kong residents may apply for the abovementioned assistance and allowances through various channels and facilitation measures provided by the departments.

Applicants for CSSA, OALA and OAA may submit applications in person at the SWD's Social Security Field Units (some of which are located in PHE shopping centres) or by telephone, fax, email, post, or submit online. Their applications may also be referred to the SWD by other government departments or non-governmental organisations. The SWD provides application guides for reference by applicants to facilitate their completion of the application form. If applicants encounter difficulties during the process, the SWD will provide them with appropriate assistance. As more detailed information is

required for CSSA applications, the SWD staff will even complete the CSSA application form based on the information provided by the applicants, explain to them details of the Scheme, understand their needs in detail and verify the submitted supporting documents through home visits or other means. CSSA applicants only need to sign the application form to confirm the information contained and declarations without filling in the application form by themselves.

The WFSFAA reviews and streamlines the application and vetting procedures of the WFA Scheme and the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS) from time to time. With respect to the WFA Scheme, the WFSFAA provides households which got approved WFA previously with application forms prefilled with basic household information, and requires less documentary proof in their subsequent applications. The WFSFAA provides reference materials for applicants such as guidance notes, checklist of documents required for the application and sample application forms. The WFSFAA sets up mobile information booths at various locations (including PHEs), and provides service counters (Note 2) and a 24-hour telephone enquiry hotline to answer public enquiries and offer assistance in filling out application forms.

In addition, the WFSFAA adopts a household-based application form to facilitate the submission of a consolidated application by families concerned for all eligible children attending primary or secondary schools or kindergartens / child care centres for applicable student financial assistance (including the STAS). Apart from providing enquiry hotlines and counter services, the WFSFAA also maintains close contact with schools with a view to offering assistance to applicants in need.

(3) and (4) The CSSA Scheme and the Social Security Allowance Scheme (SSA) form part of Hong Kong's social security system, and no contribution is required from the recipients. Eligibility criteria for the various assistance and allowances differ in correspondence to their policy objectives and target recipients. Regardless of whether being a PHE resident, an applicant is eligible for assistance or allowance as long as he/she meets the relevant eligibility criteria. According to the established mechanism, the Government adjusts the CSSA standard payment rates and SSA rates of allowances annually on the basis of the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices movement to preserve the purchasing power of the relevant cash assistance.

Since the introduction of the WFA Scheme in April 2018, the Government has reviewed the WFA Scheme at various times and implemented a number of enhancement measures, including relaxing the eligibility criteria by extending the Scheme to singleton households and allowing household members to aggregate their working hours to apply for WFA. In addition, the Government has increased the rates of allowance under the WFA Scheme thrice to further alleviate the burden of grassroots working families (including those living in PHEs).

As regards the STAS, all eligible families (irrespective of whether they are living in PHEs) with financial needs may apply for assistance, which comprises a textbook grant and a flat-rate grant. The WFSFAA adjusts the

rates of the above grants every year in accordance with the established mechanism, including determining the textbook grant with reference to the costs of textbooks for Primary 1 to Secondary 6 based on a survey conducted before the start of each school year, and revising the flat-rate grant annually according to the Composite Consumer Price Index movement to provide assistance for needy families (including those living in PHEs) to meet textbook and miscellaneous school expenses.

The Government has launched the Strive and Rise Programme since 2022 which focuses on lifting secondary school students from underprivileged families (including those in PHEs) out of intergenerational poverty. Through tripartite collaboration of the Government, the business sector and the community, the Scheme broadens student participants' horizons, reinforce their self-confidence, develop a positive life attitude, set goals for their future and strive for upward mobility.

Note 1: Including public rental housing (PRH) flats in PRH estates, Tenants Purchase Scheme estates and Home Ownership Scheme / Buy or Rent Option Scheme / Mortgage Subsidy Scheme / Green Form Subsidised Home Ownership Scheme courts under the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA), as well as rental housing units under the Hong Kong Housing Society.

Note 2: The service counters are located at the HA customer service centre in Lok Fu and the WFSFAA office in Kwun Tong.